



# An Element of Strength: Reinventing Small-Unit Training

by Major Dennis P. Chapman

*"The companies and battalions will be more dispersed, and the men less under the immediate eye of their officers, and therefore a higher order of intelligence and courage on the part of the individual soldier will be an element of strength."<sup>1</sup>*

— William Tecumseh Sherman, 1875

An insurgency, such as the conflict in Iraq, can demand more of junior officers and noncommissioned officers than any other kind of conflict. The United States' involvement in Iraq calls for a reexamination of how to prepare U.S. forces for combat. One observer recently notes, "The current training scenarios and task organizations that ... our battalions use, culminating with a rotation at the [National Training Center], is not sufficient for preparing them for duty in Iraq. The emphasis has to shift, at least in part, from battalion and brigade-level, to small-scale operations that seldom rise above the company level."<sup>2</sup>

While indisputably correct, this remark is also somewhat misleading because it implies that superior small-unit leaders would have been less important in the large-scale conventional fight envisaged during the Cold War than in the struggle we face today. Our Warsaw Pact adversaries might have agreed, believing as they did that a large force would inevitably overwhelm a better quality but small-

er opponent, whose qualitative advantages would prove ephemeral in the face of aggressively and intelligently applied numerical superiority.

Victory would be achieved at the operational level by rapidly massing superior forces at decisive points on the battlefield. The tactical effectiveness of companies and platoons was of little consequence — it was *mass* that mattered. But Soviet orthodoxy was American heresy. We were just as eager to rapidly concentrate combat power at the critical time and place, but knowing that we could never numerically match the Soviets gun for gun or man for man, we counted on better technology and better training to offset their superiority. We took it as an article of faith that soldiers were our secret weapons; in motivation, initiative, intelligence, and training our soldiers would more than match the horde of conscripted, poorly trained automatons the Soviets would hurl against us. Our *soldiers* — few though they were — would give us the margin of victory.

Having previously pinned our hopes for victory on soldiers at the lowest echelon, it may seem strange that we now hear at least one voice of caution, warning that our approach to training, with its heavy emphasis on rigorously exercising units at the brigade or battalion level, may be failing our junior leaders. This is not as strange as it seems. Reflecting on recent conflicts, small-unit leadership has not been as decisive a factor as we anticipated during the Cold War.

Relentlessly hammering enemy command and control nodes, logistics infrastructure, and combat units with a crushing weight of ordnance delivered with an accuracy and impunity not seen before, we so demoralized and degraded our foes that they were defeated before our first rifleman squeezed his trigger. The respective quality of our own, versus enemy, small units has become less decisive. We have become more like the Soviets, in that we no longer look to dynamic small-unit leaders for the key margin of victory, but look instead to brutally applied combat power. For the Soviets, this meant hurling massive numbers of men and machines against decisive points at critical times, a torrent of force delivered on the ground with a ferocity and speed they thought would eclipse any qualitative enemy advantage.

*"For once, we face a foe who has effectively preempted us — by relying on suicide attacks, roadside bombings, and similar acts, all perpetrated amidst the urban populace, Iraqi guerrillas have taken our firepower and technology advantages out of the fight both by creating an unacceptable risk of civilian casualties and by depriving us of lucrative targets. As a result, initiative, enterprise, and valor are once again at a premium."*



The U.S. approach is different. Our keys to victory have been our ability to disrupt enemy communications, dislocate his plans, and degrade his forces through air superiority, as well as our seemingly limitless logistics resources. We have preempted effective enemy small-unit action by so demoralizing him early in the campaign that he can only collapse when finally confronted by our tactical forces. Unfortunately, however, events now unfolding in Iraq remind us that we cannot always avoid an ugly slog at the squad level.

For once, we face a foe who has effectively preempted *us* — by relying on suicide attacks, roadside bombings, and similar acts, all perpetrated amidst the urban populace, Iraqi guerrillas have taken our firepower and technology advantages out of the fight both by creating an unacceptable risk of civilian casualties and by depriving us of lucrative targets. As a result, initiative, enterprise, and valor are once again at a premium.

Obviously, we should use all the resources at our disposal to reduce the enemy to an empty, brittle husk before the ground fight begins. But we cannot count on always being able to do so. We may someday face a conventional foe positioned to offset our technological advantages. To guarantee future victory, we must give our junior leaders what they need to defeat a fresh, unbroken foe who may be equipped and supplied as well or better

than our own soldiers. Unfortunately, we have not always done so, as David Hackworth illustrates, "I found one West Point-trained platoon leader, for example, attacking a dug-in 'enemy' across a pool-table flat field. I chewed his ass, only then realizing he really didn't know any better. He'd had a lot of book learning thrown at him, but little hands-on training to experience how to do it the right way ... So, I made the guy do it again. I made him call for simulated supporting fires this time ... made his troops use fire and maneuver and concealed avenues of approach. Then I made him do it again. And again. He learned, but it shouldn't have been my job to teach him: why hadn't his company commander shown him the right way? Or his battalion commander? *The problem was that these guys were so busy juggling commitments they didn't have the time*" [emphasis added].<sup>3</sup>

This incident occurred in 1965 with 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, but the problem at the root of Hackworth's anecdote remains with us. I have observed similar mistakes among 10th Mountain Division soldiers, Army National Guard troops, and Reserve Officer Training Corps cadets. As in Hackworth's day, in the press of urgent requirements and major training events, small-unit training gets pushed aside. To understand the impact this has on small-unit readiness, we need only follow Hackworth's lead and explore how well our junior leaders execute their most basic tactical responsibil-

ity: exploiting fire, movement, and terrain to accomplish their mission.

Everyone understands how to use fire and movement to gain advantage over the enemy: one element fixes and suppresses the enemy with a high volume of accurate fire, while another maneuvers against a vulnerable flank or rear. Properly executing this simple procedure will produce an enemy who, having focused on the force to his front, is shocked to find another descending on him from an unexpected direction. Unfortunately, we often execute this drill poorly. What should be a bold move against enemy vulnerability ends up as an old-fashioned frontal attack. Soldiers often forget the key to effective fire and maneuver — skillful exploitation of terrain. Many leaders conceive the value of cover and concealment too narrowly. We all know how to use cover to facilitate the fire and movement of individual soldiers, but many leaders fail to see terrain as a combat multiplier for small units.

Figure 1 illustrates a properly executed drill for a stationary supporting element that lays down suppressive fires. Under the protection of these fires, an assault element executes a bold, deep maneuver, moving by a covered and concealed route, using available terrain, vegetation, smoke, or distance to mask the movement from enemy observation and fire. When executed properly, the enemy remains oblivious until the assault element falls on the

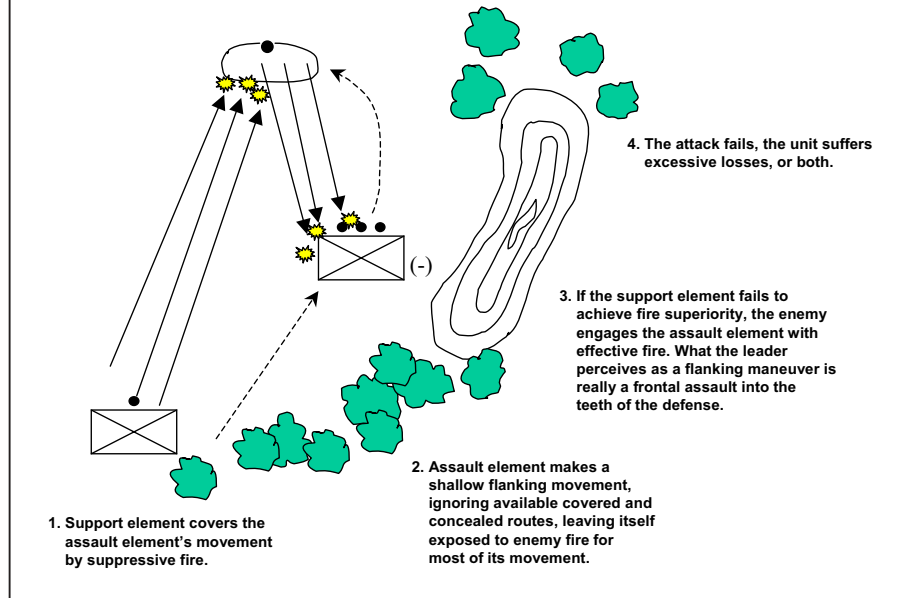
enemy flank or rear. This is much more difficult than it sounds, as shown in Figure 2.

Many platoon leaders go through the motions of the drill but sacrifice its synergy by failing to factor terrain characteristics into the plan. Instead of a bold maneuver, the assault element often makes a shallow flanking movement that ignores available cover and concealment, exposing itself to enemy observation and fire throughout the assault. If the support element achieves fire superiority (that is, if its fires are effective enough to prevent the enemy from returning effective fire of its own) then the attack may still succeed; but if not, the enemy will engage the assault element with effective fires throughout its movement. The result will be excessive casualties, a failed attack, or both.

The issue does not appear to be that soldiers lack tactical skills. The real question is whether the Army fosters thorough junior leader development. In my view, it does not. Instead, we have a system that brings most junior leaders to a common baseline; however, proficiency does not encourage further growth into junior-level experts.

One reason for this is that our entire collective training effort is built around combined-arms, multiechelon training at the brigade or battalion level, culminating in combat training center (CTC) rotations. This approach has certainly born tremendous fruit, as evidenced by our stunning victories during Operation Desert

**Figure 2. What we often really do:**

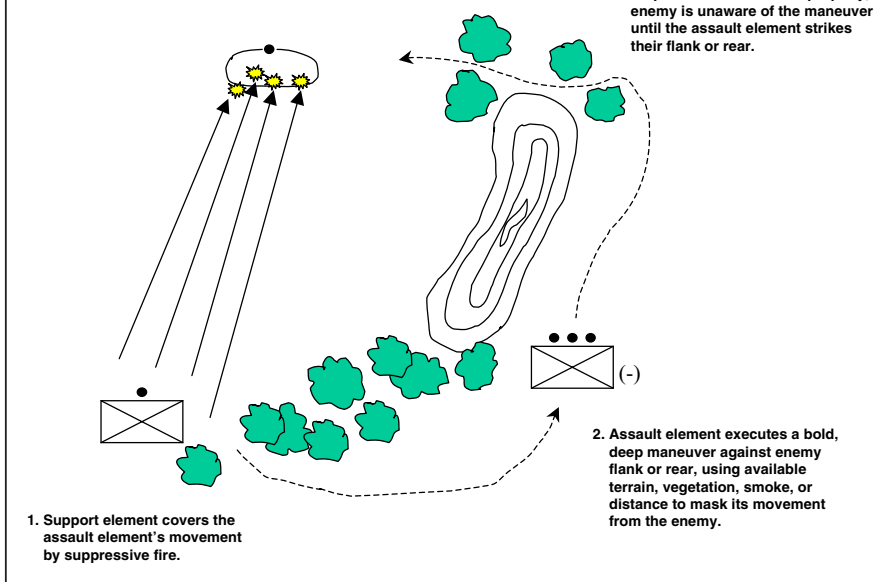


Storm and Iraqi Freedom. The unintended consequence, though, is de-emphasizing training at lower echelons — the proficiency mentality. Under our CTC training model, small unit tactical proficiency becomes not an end, but a mere steppingstone to higher-echelon training. As units prepare for CTC rotations, squads and platoons get just enough dedicated training time to ensure they can support the commander's higher-echelon training objectives. While this training is valuable, we do not train enough to bring our crews, squads, and platoons to their full potential.

This is understandable, given the principle of scarcity. Commanders have finite time, money, fuel, ammunition, and access to ranges and training areas needed to train units. They must apportion these scarce resources among competing training priorities, including the very different training needs of soldiers at the lowest echelons versus the needs of those at the highest echelons. Clearly, at some point, commanders must shift their emphasis from small-unit training to collective training aimed at larger units and staffs. But this has become the permanent, almost exclusive training emphasis; small-unit training never rises to the fore. Rather than providing their small units with numerous, repeated opportunities to apply, hone, and improve tactical skills again and again, commanders build training programs that merely check the box, exercising critical skills just often enough to provide a refresher and verify baseline proficiency, but not to produce skills of the highest order.

Crews, squads, and platoons do participate in brigade- and battalion-level training because these events are multiechelon training. The commander and his staff maneuver their subordinate elements on the ground, forcing them to execute those tasks that support the brigade or battalion mission. The idea of multiechelon training is to get the most out of limited resources by training all echelons, from the fire team or vehicle crew to the brigade staff, simultaneously during a single event. Using this method, every soldier does receive training. The problem is that not every soldier receives *equal* training.

**Figure 1. What we should do:**





*"Everyone understands how to use fire and movement to gain advantage over the enemy: one element fixes and suppresses the enemy with a high volume of accurate fire, while another maneuvers against a vulnerable flank or rear. Properly executing this simple procedure will produce an enemy who, having focused on the force to his front, is shocked to find another descending on him from an unexpected direction. Unfortunately, we often execute this drill poorly."*

During CTC rotations and similar exercises, battalion and brigade battle staffs endure a grueling test of mettle. Small units, on the other hand, can easily go the entire rotation with little or no opposing force (OPFOR) contact. This was the case during my own National Training Center (NTC) experience years ago.

As a new second lieutenant, struggling to fill a captain's shoes as a light infantry battalion S1, I endured a very stressful rotation indeed. But some months later, having moved down to the line as a rifle platoon leader, I heard about the rotation from a different perspective: from the troop's point of view, the NTC was just a series of long marches through the desert to empty objectives.

I will not argue that a long march through the desert cannot be good training — exercising the troop leading procedures is valuable training, whether or not it culminates with enemy contact. But a long march to an empty objective is hardly *optimal* training. Similar examples occurred during an assignment with a training support brigade preparing Army National Guard units for Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) rotations. During their brigade-level rehearsal exercises, it was a real challenge to ensure that platoons met their training objectives. We solved this by improvisation, vectoring OPFOR toward platoons and vice versa to ensure that every platoon experienced at least one contact during the exercise. The CTCs compensate for this problem, at least in part, through the small unit live-fire ex-

ercises they conduct each rotation. However, as good as this training is, the CTC target training audience remains battalion and brigade commanders and staffs. Clearly, that is the right audience, but the CTC model has focused on that audience almost to the exclusion of all else. Small-unit training has become little more than a poor relation.

Part of the problem is that the proficiency mentality implicitly embraces a flawed theory of learning. Small units and individual soldiers are trained and evaluated on key tasks at periodic intervals. Having met the standard, further training is implicitly treated as unnecessary and wasteful. I encountered this as a lieutenant working in the battalion S3 shop. Toward the end of one year, we found ourselves with a surplus of small-arms ammunition and were looking for a way to dispense it. Innocently, I made what seemed the obvious suggestion — send the troops to the range. To my surprise, this was dismissed out of hand, not because we had something better to do but because, "we already did that." The subtext was clear: marksmanship training is not about making our soldiers as lethal as they possibly can be with their individual weapons; it is about satisfying a regulatory requirement.

Another example comes from a friend in Germany, assigned to a mechanized infantry battalion, he described a lengthy training density where vehicle crews conducted gunnery while the dismounts sat idle in bivouac. When asked why the bat-

talion did not conduct some sort of concurrent small-unit training, he replied, "We did that the month before." Underlying these examples is the implicit assumption that once soldiers have trained to standard on a given task, additional training on similar tasks is a waste. But this ignores how people learn — *repetition*. Iterations of given tasks provide insight, which provides the framework for future iterations. As this process of repetition continues, we develop an intuition about the task that allows us to adapt to variations, make inferences, and predict outcomes even as conditions change. This is exactly the kind of mental agility that we need in our small-unit leaders. But it will only come through intensive effort focused on them and their subordinates.

The benefit of intensive training at battalion and brigade levels has been amply demonstrated. We must optimize our training to increase the benefits at squad and platoon levels, while retaining the benefits at higher echelons. We do not need to revamp our doctrine or methods as much as change the minds of those responsible for training — leaders at every level. Part of the solution requires striking a better balance between small-unit and higher-echelon training. We must strike this balance carefully, however. The last thing we need is a whole new layer of training requirements to rob soldiers of their already limited family time. This means making judicious use of the time we already devote to training. In part, it requires shifting some of that time from training aimed at higher echelons to small-unit training; not a radical shift that would undermine the hard-earned skills of commanders and staffs, but a moderate one that would better meet the training needs of soldiers serving at all levels.

Perhaps the best way to improve small-unit training is for leaders at those echelons to take charge of the matter themselves — assume ownership of their own training. But these captains, lieutenants, and sergeants follow the lead of their superiors; they cannot fill the vacuum left by senior-leader focus on higher-echelon training *unless they are empowered to do so*. Two comments made by fellow officers early in my career illustrate this. One officer described the light infantry platoon leader's main garrison duty as "putting his feet up on the desk and reading the paper." Another related his perception of a light infantry soldier's chief garrison activity: playing video games in the barracks.<sup>4</sup> Reading those remarks today,

one might condemn these officers as indolent. But this was categorically not the case. As with all the officers in the battalion, they were extremely dedicated and highly effective leaders. Nor are these remarks inconsistent with the assertions of Mr. Hackworth and myself that commanders and staffs are too busy to attend adequately to small-unit training. In fact, they constitute further evidence of the insufficient attention we give to small-unit training. In this instance, the battalion commander and staff were busy — very busy. But the troops at the line had time on their hands for training. Why didn't we use it? Because the commander and his staff were consumed with other demands, but the unit's junior leaders did not perceive themselves as empowered to deal with the matter.

Empowerment means two things. First, it means affirmatively providing junior leaders both the latitude and the resources they need to plan and execute training at their level during whatever time they have available. More importantly, though, *it means explicitly holding them responsible for putting those resources to good use.* It requires stimulating junior leaders to plan and execute training on their own initiative, using whatever assets they have available; it means involving them more extensively in planning the training directed by their superiors by ensuring that they understand the training objectives of their commanders; it means allowing — expecting — junior leaders to develop training and objectives at their own level that support those at higher levels; finally, it means expecting noncommissioned officers to develop individual training goals that support the collective training objectives of their superiors in the chain of command.

Empowering small-unit leaders to plan and execute train-

ing at their own level is risky business. Senior leaders need to be realistic about what such training will look like, and they need to remember that training can be valuable, even if it is rough around the edges. When a battalion commander directs training, he can provide all the bells and whistles such as rehearsals and certified instructors. A squad or platoon leader might not have the resources to prepare training that thoroughly, but that does not mean that he cannot train well. While the amenities a battalion commander can provide certainly add value to training, we need to make sure that our junior leaders do not wait until they can make training pretty before they start.

Empowering junior leaders means risking and accepting mistakes. We need to accept this risk if we are to strengthen small-unit training. We also need to keep the risk in perspective — for our junior leaders, planning and executing their own training is training itself, even if they make a mistake or two along the way.

In closing, let me emphasize that nothing in this article is meant to denigrate the fine young men and women leading teams, crews, squads, and platoons in our Army. We are blessed with the finest and most ably led soldiers that our Army or any army has ever had. Nor do I contend that they are anything less than capable and effective. However, as good as they are, we can and must help them become

even better. We owe them and our Nation nothing less.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup>William Tecumseh Sherman, *Memoirs of General William T. Sherman*, D. Appleton and Company, New York, 1875, volume 2, p. 395.

<sup>2</sup>Captain Chad Foster, "Preparing for Iraq: A New Approach to Combined Arms Training," *ARMOR*, November-December 2003, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup>David H. Hackworth, *About Face*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1989, pp. 456–457.

<sup>4</sup>I hasten to acknowledge that these comments came from officers in a light infantry battalion. With no tracked vehicles to maintain, we admittedly had a much smaller workload in garrison than a mechanized or armor battalion would. Nonetheless, I suspect that the basic issue of complacency toward small-unit training probably applies to units of all types.

MAJ Dennis Chapman is currently serving as team chief, Deployments Branch, U.S. Army National Guard Readiness Center, Arlington, VA. He received a B.S. from the United States Military Academy and a J.D. from Thomas M. Cooley Law School. His military education includes the Armor Officer Advanced Course, Combined Arms and Services Staff School, and the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College. He has served in various command and staff positions, including assistant professor of military science, Michigan State University; operations officer, deputy S3, and brigade S3, 75th Division (Training Support); and commander, Company A, 3d Battalion, 126th Infantry Regiment, Michigan Army National Guard.



*"Rather than providing their small units with numerous, repeated opportunities to apply, hone, and improve tactical skills again and again, commanders build training programs that merely check the box, exercising critical skills just often enough to provide a refresher and verify baseline proficiency, but not to produce skills of the highest order."*